

2
Literary Modernity in Perspective

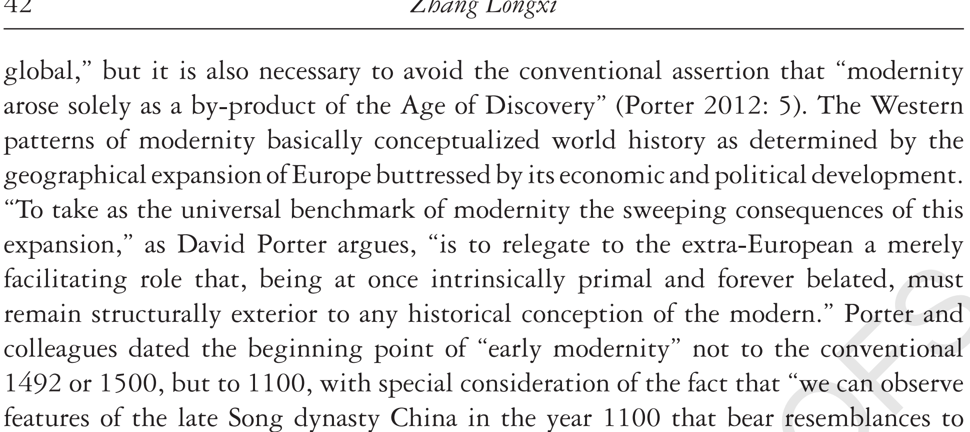
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Modern Chinese literature is inseparable from the concept of Chinese “modernity” and therefore inseparable from the social and historical conditions at the turn of the nineteenth century to the twentieth, which witnessed unprecedented challenges to traditional Chinese social structure, the collapse of the Qing Empire, and the end of dynastic history. The concept of modernity was self-consciously defined against that old imperial system and the entire traditional apparatus that sustained its political and cultural edifice. However, modernity is by no means a simple concept, and there is much discussion of its problematic nature in recent scholarship because it is a contested concept not only in the discourse of postmodernism, which supposedly supersedes it, but also in the critique of modernity as a normative concept based on European historical experience at the expense of a more expansive view of global history. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, “multiple modernities” has become a common term in the scholarly discourse in the humanities and social sciences. “One of the most important implications of the term ‘multiple modernities’ is that modernity and Westernization are not identical. Western patterns of modernity are not the only authentic modernities, though they enjoy historical precedence and continue to be a basic reference point for others” (Sachsenmaier, Riedel, with Eisenstadt 2002: 27). In other words, modernity is now understood as a much broader concept than what an earlier discourse of modernization signified in much of the twentieth century, in which modernity was understood largely on the basis of European history and Western social, political, and cultural patterns.




Not only has the idea of multiple modernities been proposed to accommodate a more expansive view, but the idea of multiple “early modernities” has also been discussed with fruitful results. It is not enough just to recognize that “the modern age, in both its geopolitical aspirations and economic underpinnings, was always already

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global," but it is also necessary to avoid the conventional assertion that "modernity arose solely as a by-product of the Age of Discovery" (Porter 2012: 5). The Western patterns of modernity basically conceptualized world history as determined by the geographical expansion of Europe buttressed by its economic and political development. "To take as the universal benchmark of modernity the sweeping consequences of this expansion," as David Porter argues, "is to relegate to the extra-European a merely facilitating role that, being at once intrinsically primal and forever belated, must remain structurally exterior to any historical conception of the modern." Porter and colleagues dated the beginning point of "early modernity" not to the conventional 1492 or 1500, but to 1100, with special consideration of the fact that "we can observe features of the late Song dynasty China in the year 1100 that bear resemblances to China in the year 1600 as well as to Italy at roughly the same time" (Porter 2012: 5). Their deliberate change of the date effectively redefined "early modernity" in a global context far beyond European expansion, and the comparative approach they took in conceptualizing "early modernities" proved to be highly productive and stimulating in our understanding of historical transitions and social changes that moved the world into what we recognize as the modern times.




In China, quite a lot of ink was spilt for a long period of time before the 1990s over the question of whether or when China had developed its "buds of capitalism." Though it is no longer debated in those terms, the implicit issue of modernity in the debate is unavoidable, for it tried to identify some basic features of capitalist development, especially in commercial activities and correlative social structure in the counties and prefectures, in the affluent region south of the Yangtze River. That discussion actually has some suggestive similarities with the "early modernities" discussed more recently by Porter and colleagues. Zhu Weizheng, a distinguished historian, thought of modern Chinese history as a long process of moving "out of the Middle Ages," and he conceptualized this process as "the history of ideas and culture from the late Ming to the late Qing dynasty," roughly from the late sixteenth to the late nineteenth century (Zhu Weizheng 2007: 6). He clearly stated that the so-called "history of budding capitalism" debated by Chinese historians decades ago was in fact "the history of transition from the medieval to the modern times" (Zhu Weizheng 2007: 9). Whereas Porter and colleagues questioned the concept of "early modernity" based on the history of European expansion, Zhu borrowed the European concept of the "Middle Ages" not to map Chinese history onto a European concept, but precisely to challenge the Eurocentric view of world history that marginalized modern China as passively responding to the external impact of European expansion. Therefore, he opposed the conventional view that the Opium Wars in the 1840s marked the beginning of modern history in China. If one "believed that only British cannons could beat China from the wilderness of the Middle Ages into the gate of modern civilization," says Zhu (2007: 6) in a sarcastic vein, one would have to come to the conclusion that "the Chinese were incapable of stepping into modernity, but could only have modernization thrust upon them." His discussion of the late Qing self-reform movement and one of its leading figures, Gong Zizhen, was meant to disprove that "British cannons" or "the salvos of the



October Revolution" had beaten the stagnant and backward China "into the gate of modern civilization." That is to say, China's historical transition from the "Middle Ages" to modernity was a long and arduous process, but it was not and could not be a passive process of "forced modernization."

The idea of change was certainly not "imported," and, in this respect, Gong Zizhen was an important pioneer thinker in the late Qing period. As early as 1814–1815, long before the Opium Wars, he already called for self-reform in the Qing Empire, arguing that the rise of each and every new dynasty was based on reform and change. "Looking back on our ancestors," says Gong Zizhen (1999: 6), "was it not in changing the failure of the previous dynasty that they could rise up? And was it not in changing the failure of their predecessors in turn that the previous dynasty could rise up?" The need to learn from foreign powers for self-strengthening became more widely acknowledged after the Opium Wars, and various proposals were put forward by influential figures from Lin Zexu, Wei Yuan, Feng Guifen, to Xue Fucheng and Zhang Zhidong. Zhang's principle of upholding traditional Chinese learning as the main body (*ti*) to be aided by Western learning as serviceable auxiliaries (*yong*) was most well-known and influential, which was originally meant to open China up for learning from the West, particularly in terms of technological advancement. The doctrine of *ti* and *yong* or the main and the auxiliary, however, has difficulty in adjusting to the quickly evolving social and historical conditions at the time, and its limitations became more and more discernible as reform gradually touched upon the different aspects of Chinese social life and cultural tradition. Some scholars have pointed out that "to insist on formulating a model of cultural combination of China and the West by defining it in terms of the main body and auxiliaries (*ti yong*), roots and twigs (*ben mo*), or the main and the supplementary (*zhu fu*) will inevitably lead to embarrassing inconsistencies and numerous flaws" (W. Ding and Chen 1995: 173). Indeed, Zhang Zhidong's doctrine had the conservative purpose of retaining what he thought to be the foundation of Chinese moral and political system—the three principles (*san gang*) that guarantee the superiority of the monarch over the subjects, father over the son, and husband over his wife. "Once one knows the principle of the monarch over the subjects, then the idea of the rights of the people will not do," he argues; "once one knows the principle of father over the son, then the idea of holding father and son as equal in legal terms and abandoning ancestor worship will not do; and once one knows the principle of husband over wife, then the idea of male–female equality will not do" (Zhang Zhidong 2002: 12). The rights of the people or democracy and the equality of men and women are all major ideas in a modern society, from which Zhang Zhidong evidently tried to distance himself, and thereby also to distance himself from reformists such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao and their more radical proposal of a constitutional monarchy.





The failure of the so-called "Hundred Days Reform" in 1898 made it clear that effective fundamental changes were impossible under the declining but rigid structure of the Qing Empire, and more radical social changes were needed to build up anything different and new. Yet, what was new could not come out of the blue, unrelated to what was old and already existent, for "the idea of a new man," as Liang Qichao (1984: 211)



famously argued, "does not mean that people of our country must abandon all that is old to follow others. There are two meanings of the word *new*: first, to temper what one originally had and make it new; and second, to take what one did not have and acquire it as new." In other words, whatever was new and modern must arise from the social and cultural environment that necessarily contained the old, which was either to be changed or to be eliminated, and nothing could be completely rootless and afloat without indigenous moorings. History follows a route all its own in each of the world's nations and cultural traditions; so the concept of modernity cannot and should not be narrowly defined on Western patterns only, without proper consideration of historical experiences of other, non-Western cultures and traditions. That is what Zhu Weizheng tried to argue in his historical writings, in which he pioneered the study of Christianity and modern China (a subject forbidden in China before the 1980s), the cultural interrelations between China and Europe during the late Ming and the early Qing dynasties, the unorthodox and more open-minded ideas of Wang Yangming's brand of Confucianism and its influence, the significance of Matteo Ricci and the other Jesuit missionaries, and also the ignorance and xenophobia of conservative elements in traditional Chinese society.





It is with a sense of continuity and transformation that many scholars today are rethinking modern Chinese history, trying to find the intricate trajectory and operations of historical forces, and navigating carefully between a simplistic view of China as passively modernized in response to external impact from the West on the one hand, and, on the other, a totally inward-looking view that refuses to see China in the larger picture of major changes in regional and global history. If modernity in the West was problematically related to nineteenth-century imperialism and colonialism, modernity (and nationalism) in China and the other non-Western countries have a different character—that of resisting the pressure from the West, while at the same time trying to transform the traditional society into a modern one, with such basic and recognizably modern features as industrialization, rational behavior in social transactions, development of trade and market economy, scientific reasoning and education, a sense of individuality and individual rights, women's rights, and a social and political structure in conformity with the ideas of human rights and democracy. As a consequence, the concept of modernity in China is a complicated and difficult one, as it is neither a close copy of Western modernity, nor a concept different from that of the West to such a degree as to violate all the basic features listed earlier, which, as core ideas and values, define what is eminently modern. Multiple modernities make sense, but they must all lead to modernity, not to its opposite or negation.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, when the last imperial dynasty was overthrown after being repeatedly defeated at the hands of Western powers and a modernized Japan, and humiliated by several unequal treaties, the situation in China appeared much darker and more precarious than a hundred years later, and many Chinese intellectuals at the time had an acute sense of urgency and anxiety over the fate of China, the anxiety of national survival. Perhaps Chen Yinque, a highly respected scholar and historian in modern China, can be seen as an exemplary spokesman for his



generation of intellectuals at the turn of the century. In October 1910, when he was traveling in Europe as a 20-year-old young man and heard the disturbing news of the annexation of Korea by imperial Japan, Chen wrote a poem to lament the fate of Korea and also express his dismay at the fate of China. He was in Berlin at the time, and the poem in part reads (Chen Yinque 1993: 3; trans. Zhang Longxi):

> At times looking toward the East over volumes of clouds,
> I dare not look back in the twilight under the sinking sun;
> Horrified that the land of the ancient sage Jizi had suffered,
> In the last ten years twice being slaughtered and wronged.
> Alas, the king surrendered and left the seal bestowed in vain
> By the Superior Empire, and in a prisoner's cage sadly gone.
> Renamed Changde, he dwelled lower than Fushimi Castle,
> A worse fate than such that lost his country, as Yao's son.
> Tao Qian lived so far after Emperor Fuxi, and I even later
> Than Tao Qian; but the anger now and in days bygone
> Over the loss of our country cries out to heaven
> From my lonely heart a sorrowful song!





Seventeen years later, when his close friend and famous scholar Wang Guowei (aka Mr Guantang) committed suicide by drowning himself in the Kunming Lake of the Summer Palace in Beijing, Chen Yinque wrote a moving tribute to his friend and interpreted Wang's death as a personal sacrifice to the demise of Chinese culture, a sacrifice that carried a deeply symbolic meaning only to be understood in the specific historical circumstances at the time. Chen wrote in the preface (1993: 10):

> Some have asked for the reason of Mr Guantang's death, and I offer this as a reply: In recent time people have been talking about Eastern and Western cultures, of which we need not discuss whether the geographical division is appropriate, their differences or similarities, superiority or inferiority; but we may posit a hypothesis. We may hypothesize that at the time when a system of cultural values is in decline, those who are cultivated in that culture must feel the pain, and the more splendidly they manifest that culture, the greater their pain; when the pain reaches to the extreme degree, nothing but suicide can put their heart at ease and fulfill their aspirations.

The core of Chinese culture, Chen continues to argue, is made of the fundamental "three principles and six disciplines," namely the hierarchical relationships of the monarch over subjects, father over son, husband over wife, and the other ethical relationships governing people's social behaviors. In this argument, we may see clearly that Chen inherited from Zhang Zhidong the same understanding of the core of traditional Chinese culture. These basic values and principles were as abstract as Plato's ideas, Chen went on to say, but they were embodied in the social and economic systems of traditional Chinese society. In earlier history, Buddhism from India held views contrary to these basic Chinese principles, but it failed to destabilize the social and

economic structure of Chinese society, even though Buddhism had spread in China for many centuries. In the last few decades, however, a totally different and new adversary had come to challenge the foundation of Chinese culture, and the impact of that new adversary, Western culture, was different from any foreign forces encountered previously. Under that impact, says Chen, the core of Chinese culture was disintegrating. He continued in a sorrowful tone (Chen Yinque 1993: 11):

> For today's China is suffering huge calamities and undergoing most unusual changes never seen before in the past thousands of years. As calamities and changes reach to the extreme, how can those who epitomize the spirit of this culture not share its fate and die with it? And that is the reason why Mr. Guantang could not but die and thus made all later generations feel the most profound sorrow and the deepest sense of loss.

In Chen Yinque's interpretation, Wang Guowei's suicide was a consciously made decision to offer his own life as sacrifice to the demise of traditional Chinese culture. The unprecedented changes and huge calamities never encountered before in the long history of China formed the basic framework within which we may understand the radical reactions among Chinese intellectuals, both those such as Wang Guowei, Chen Yinque, and Wu Mi, who lamented the decline of traditional Chinese culture and tried to salvage whatever was possible against the grain in an overall social tendency toward Westernization, and those such as Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, and Hu Shi, who believed that the only way for China to be rejuvenated and move forward was to get rid of the heavy burden of history and tradition, particularly the Confucian politics and ethics of "the three principles and six disciplines," so that China could be changed and modernized. The latter group of intellectuals became movers and shakers of the May Fourth New Culture Movement and precipitated the social and historical changes in early-twentieth-century China. Though different in their reactions to the impact of modernization and Westernization, both groups of intellectuals were deeply concerned about China's present and future, and both groups were not only rooted in traditional Chinese culture, but had profound knowledge and even personal experience of the foreign—Japan, Europe, or the United States.




Lu Xun (1981: 1: 130), who saw himself as "bearing the heavy burden of tradition and shouldering the floodgate of darkness to let the young escape to a spacious place of light," is perhaps most representative of those radical iconoclastic intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement. Such a self image shows that Lu Xun thought of his own generation as being bogged down in the old tradition, but he was hopeful of the possibilities for China's younger generation to be different and better—which bore a sign of the times, when ideas of Darwinian evolution theory formed a powerful background for understanding the transformation of history and society. Lu Xun (1981: 1: 286) described himself as a fighter turned against his own tradition, in which he was himself deeply embedded, a fighter who, "coming from the old camp and seeing things more clearly, was able to hit the strong enemy lethally by turning the weapon back to strike." One of his most controversial remarks was his reply to a newspaper's enquiry about



drawing up a reading list for Chinese youth: "I think it is better to read less—or even no—Chinese books, but read more foreign books" (Lu Xun 1981: 3: 12). Such a remark should be understood in the social conditions in early 1925, when old "Chinese books" were still being read widely and cultural conservatives were advocating reading Confucian classics among school children and young students, while Lu Xun and the other advocates of the New Culture were trying to change the fundamental elements of literary culture, including the very medium of writing from the classical language to *baihua* or the modern vernacular, a fundamental change comparable to that from Latin to modern European languages during the Renaissance. In China, literary modernity manifested itself as writing in the vernacular *vis-à-vis* the classical language, elevating traditionally neglected genres, such as fiction and drama, while importing new genres from the West, such as the Western-style novel and new poetry, and representing a whole set of new ideas and values against the traditional value system, the Confucian orthodoxy in particular.

This is, of course, a familiar story of radical changes during the New Culture movement, a story that puts emphasis on the new and the modern within the general context of a grand narrative of social evolution and development, in which literary and cultural transformations are inextricably bound up, particularly in mainland China after the 1950s, with the political discourse of progress and revolution. It is undeniable that the spirit of the May Fourth Movement was radically anti-traditional, and that the debates at the time were rather heated and fierce, sometimes even virulent, but cultural changes were impossible if there were only breaks, but no continuity or inheritance. Yu Yingshi is certainly right to point out the continuities between the May Fourth and traditional culture by arguing that the iconoclastic tendency of the May Fourth radicals was already adumbrated in the rather arcane debate between the "present-day script school" and the "archaic script school" (*jin gu wen zhi zheng*) in classic studies in the late Qing dynasty. Advocates of New Culture were not only deeply rooted in traditional learning, but they used their knowledge of the tradition to fight against tradition, which was exactly what Lu Xun thought he was doing. "In their fight against tradition and Confucian moral principles," says Yu (1982: 102–103), "they would first go back, wittingly or unwittingly, to the fountainhead of unorthodox or anti-orthodox thoughts within the tradition itself in search of legitimacy. For in comparison these thoughts were what they felt most familiar with. As for the new foreign ideas, as they had neither long experience nor deep understanding of them, those ideas could generate new meanings only by grafting themselves somewhat incongruously onto some concepts and ideas already within the tradition."




Although not all foreign ideas were "incongruously" grafted onto old concepts in the Chinese tradition during the May Fourth period, grafting is actually not a bad metaphor for the process of cultural interaction by means of which cultural elements from a foreign tradition may take root in an indigenous one, integrated with some native ideas and thereby endowing these ideas with new meaning and gradually causing changes in the substance of the whole tradition. This may be said to characterize the general process of cultural integration of any kind, a process that has happened in all traditions in



history. That is to say, no tradition is completely pure, just one with itself, for it always contains orthodox ideas that tend to preserve and stabilize what already exist, but also unorthodox ideas that tend to destabilize, change, and be different from the status quo. Therefore, any radical tendency of thought would naturally go back to tradition and try to find unorthodox or anti-orthodox precursors. Since most discussions of the May Fourth Movement focused on its radical anti-traditionalism, it becomes a much-needed corrective and a complementary view to look at the continuities and interrelations between the May Fourth Movement and traditional Chinese culture.

It is thus important to understand modern Chinese literature in its relations with the native classical tradition on the one hand, and the new Western forms of literary expression on the other. What was "modern" and its evaluation were largely determined by the historical circumstances at the time, and they would inevitably change in perceptible degrees as the historical circumstances changed. The literary scene in the early twentieth century was rich, multivalent, and varied. The May Fourth New Literature was radically new, but Lu Xun also drew literary resources in both form and content from classical works, and Hu Shi started experimenting new poetry under the influence of Song *ci* poetry, while other writers continued writing in traditional forms with traditional themes. What is considered new and modern and what is perceived to be the main question of the time are largely determined by the social and historical circumstances of a given time. One hundred years ago, China was weak and its traditional culture was in decline, lamented by those who cherished traditional values and wanted to recuperate those values from demise, but pushed down further by those who thought that these values were the very reason for China's weakness and decline. "Now many people have big fear, so do I," Lu Xun (1981: 1: 307) wrote in an article published in *New Youth* (Xin qingnian) in November 1918; "what many people fear is that 'Chinese' as a name will be wiped out; but what I fear is that Chinese will be nudged out of 'people of the world'." For Lu Xun and many other intellectuals at the time, whether China and the Chinese would be able to survive as a nation and a culture was a real and pressing issue. Similarly, it was still largely felt to be the issue in the 1980s when China had just stepped out of the disastrous self-enclosure and political infighting during the Cultural Revolution.




The situation today is, of course, very different, as China has been on the rise in the last 30 years in the era of reform and opening-up, having grown into the second largest economy in the world, and playing an increasingly more important role economically and politically in world affairs. It is quite unlikely that anyone in China today would have the same kind of fear Lu Xun talked about, and with the change of times and conditions, the concept of modernity and how people think about modern Chinese history would also change. In Western historiography, contemporary scholarship no longer speaks of the "dark" Middle Ages, from which Renaissance used to be understood as a completely different and new period, a sudden and total break; instead, historians now mostly focus on continuities and gradual changes in thinking about historical transitions from the medieval to the modern. Likewise, in Chinese scholarship since the 1990s, there is much rethinking of modern Chinese history since the May Fourth



Movement, a revaluation of tradition, and a revived interest in Confucianism and in traditional culture in general. Literary modernity is also, of necessity, being rethought and reconceptualized.

From the 1950s till the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, history and literary criticism were heavily politicized in China, with a predominant official narrative that appropriated the May Fourth New Culture as part of the success story of New China led by the Communist Party and its supreme leader, Chairman Mao. In that official discourse, Lu Xun was deified as a sort of patron saint of the Communist revolution, even though he never joined the Communist Party. "The chief commander of China's Cultural Revolution, he was not only a great man of letters, but a great thinker and revolutionary"—with these words Mao sanctioned Lu Xun's canonization. "On the cultural front, he was the bravest and most correct, the firmest, the most loyal, and the most ardent national hero, a hero without parallel in our history" (Mao 1965: 2: 372). However, Lu Xun's deification also meant the drastic reduction and simplification of this great writer, the erasure of his self-doubts and self-critique, while many of his close friends and followers, such as Hu Feng and Feng Xuefeng, were persecuted and severely criticized in China, even arrested and imprisoned as counter-revolutionary for several decades. The post-Mao era saw some dramatic changes in contemporary Chinese society, and many old and orthodox ideas were put in question. A significant sign of the change was the call to rewrite literary history in the 1980s, and there appeared many efforts as correctives of the stifling official discourse in literary criticism in the previous decades.




In Beijing in the 1980s, Qian Liqun, Huang Ziping, and Chen Pingyuan (2004: 11) proposed to re-envision the history of twentieth-century Chinese literature as the following:

> a process of change and transition, and the final completion of such transition, from ancient Chinese literature to modern Chinese literature, a process in which Chinese literature walks towards and is merged into the general structure of world literature, a process of the formation of modern national consciousness (including aesthetic consciousness) from a literary perspective (alongside political, moral, and many other perspectives) under the circumstances of great cultural encounters and exchanges between the East and the West, and a process in which the rejuvenation and rise of this old Chinese nation, in a time of great transition from the old into the new, are refracted and represented through the art of language.

The salient points made here, particularly the emphasis on the correlation of Chinese literature and world literature and the aesthetic and artistic aspects of literary creation, were evidently new in the specific context of the 1980s and were opposed to the ideological control of literature in the orthodox theory of "revolutionary realism," which insisted on viewing literature as a "reflection" of social reality and, at the same time, a serviceable "tool" in the cause of socialist revolution.

In Shanghai, also in the 1980s, Chen Sihe and Wang Xiaoming led the discussion of rewriting literary history and published a number of articles in a literary magazine. Later, Zhang Peiheng and Chen Sihe, both teaching at Fudan University, led another



significant discussion of the history of modern Chinese literature, particularly the issue of periodization. Again, their attempt at new ways of conceptualizing modern literary history was first and foremost a reaction against the official discourse that offered a distorted view of modern Chinese literature as a tool of political struggle. This is clearly indicated by Zhang Peiheng when he identified "a certain authoritative way of periodization" as the root cause of the problem of periodization in the study of modern Chinese literature, namely, the division of Chinese history of the last 150 years into early modern history (*jindai shi*), from the Opium Wars of the 1840s to the May Fourth Movement of 1919, and modern history (*xiandai shi*), from the May Fourth movement of 1919 to the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The former or early modern history was thought to be the history of China's "old democratic revolution" led by the bourgeoisie, and the latter was supposed to be the history of a "new democratic revolution" led by the proletariat. "Added to such periodization the idea of literature as an auxiliary to politics," says Zhang Peiheng, "one would arrive at the logical conclusion that literature from the Opium Wars to the May Fourth movement was early modern literature, of which the main trend was a literary embodiment of the demands of bourgeois democracy, while literature starting with the May Fourth Movement was modern literature" (P. Zhang and Chen 2002: 12). No respectable scholar of modern Chinese literature today would endorse such a periodization and its rationale, and the attempt to rewrite literary history became a much needed corrective of the official discourse, an effort to depoliticize literary history that was in itself a significantly political move, which should be understood within the internal politics of Chinese history since the end of the Cultural Revolution and the end of Mao's rule.




And yet, the study of Chinese literature is not just an internal business in China, but one that goes far beyond the borders of the Chinese mainland. In fact, native Chinese scholarship since the 1990s has been increasingly connected with, and influenced by, China studies outside China, particularly in the United States. This is especially true of the attempt at rethinking modern Chinese literature and literary modernity. Generally speaking, if we may characterize native Chinese scholarship in the 1980s and its effort to rewrite literary history as largely responding to internal political changes in the post-Mao era, China studies in the United States, particularly the study of modern Chinese literature, may be seen as responding to a very different intellectual milieu, in which postmodernism, postcolonialism, cultural studies, gender studies, and many other theoretical issues and concerns constitute an overall context for the search of research questions and their interpretations. Redefining literary modernity against the main discourse of modernization represented by the May Fourth New Culture has been the substance of much rethinking of modern Chinese literature in the past few decades. One important aspect of such rethinking is the critical attention paid to what was marginalized in the May Fourth Movement, a revaluation of the late Qing as either anticipating much of what was considered modern in later history, or offering an alternative to what the May Fourth mainstream represented. As early as 1980, Milena Doleželová-Velingerová—and even earlier, a number of her Czech and Russian



colleagues—already argued for a critical re-examination of late Qing fiction as a transitional form from the old to the new, thus representing a predecessor of the new novel in twentieth-century China. More recently, David Wang clearly puts forward an argument against the May Fourth mainstream as he declares that "late Qing fiction is not a mere prelude to 'modern' Chinese literature, but a most active stage that precedes its rise. Late Qing fiction would have led to a very different version of the Chinese modern had it not been rejected by high-minded 'modern' Chinese writers as so obviously 'pre-modern'" (1997: 16). Works of late Qing fiction rejected by the May Fourth intellectuals as decadent or "pre-modern" include works of four genres, what Wang (1997: 22) called "depravity romance, chivalric cycles, grotesque exposés, and science fantasy." Wang argues that these late Qing works, often dismissed as low-brow popular fiction by later critics, are "repressed modernities" in Chinese literature, but his argument is not just meant to locate the "origin" of the modern elsewhere, earlier than the May Fourth, or merely to "rehabilitate" those works, but to rethink literary history by imagining an alternative picture of Chinese modernity. The idea of "repressed modernities" refers to a "rethinking of literary history," says Wang (1997: 21):

> I do not see the appearance of the modern in late Qing literature as having followed a singular, inevitable format of evolution or revolution, a view commonly held by literati since the May Fourth. Rather, drawing on theories recently developed in certain social and human sciences, I see the late Qing as a crucial moment in which many incipient modernities competed for fulfillment.




In other words, what we see today as modern might have been something very different, if those "repressed modernities" given expression in late Qing fiction were acknowledged to be legitimately modern, particularly in the framework of "theories recently developed in certain (Western) social and human sciences."

Such radical rethinking of literary modernity has a strong impact on scholarship in China, and it has at least the effect of opening up new prospects in the study of modern Chinese literature. "From adventures in time to erotic fantasies, from visions of transvestitism to tales of horror" (D. Wang 1997: 18), such works become worthy of critical attention, mainly because the themes and innovations in these works have a sort of resonance with the interests and issues that have become prominent in the recent development of Western theories. This is clearly recognized by some Chinese scholars as well. In their comment on Wang's work, for example, Ji Jin and Yu Xiayun cautiously expressed their doubts as well as their appreciation. Drawing on the theoretical works of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Fredric Jameson, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Homi Bhabha, Wang's effort to elevate those "repressed modernities" displays, they argue, "greater hermeneutic abilities than knowledge of historical documentation," so much so that some critics have faulted Wang for leaning too much toward "historical imagination," but not enough to make a convincing case for his rehabilitation of late Qing fiction. At the same time, however, they also argue that Wang's "value system and narrative strategy, clearly different from those of the May Fourth, should at least



be positively acknowledged and fully understood as offering an alternative way of writing about modern Chinese literature" (S. Chen and Wang 2011: 218).

Perhaps every generation has the impulse and desire to rethink the past and rewrite history in response to its own social and cultural conditions at a specific historical moment. In China, rethinking modern literary history evidently has some bearing on the changed and changing situation in economic, social, and political terms since the 1990s, showing a greater variety of positions and viewpoints than the more unified critical tendency in the 1980s that mainly, and rather consciously, continued the May Fourth legacy. The world is changing, and for China, it seems to be changing to a better condition, a brave new world really, while the West is going through the difficult time of an economic downturn. Rethinking history, however, cannot and should not simply take an opposite or positional stance *vis-à-vis* what an earlier generation took, but should have a healthy dose of sympathetic understanding of our predecessors and the major historical events that existed at the time. One hundred years ago, whether China could survive as a nation seemed to many Chinese intellectuals a real concern, both to traditionalists such as Wang Guowei and Chen Yingque and to anti-traditionalists such as Chen Duxiu and Lu Xun. The last dynasty collapsed, followed by chaotic conflicts among warlords, and, even long afterward, Chinese history was filled with danger, as much of the territories was lost under the aggressive Japanese invasion. Today, all that is past, and national survival is no longer an issue. On the contrary, the rise of China has generated a sense of national pride, and we often hear the optimistic prediction that the twenty-first century will be China's century. That is certainly promising, but for a more sober-minded understanding of the present and the future, informed with historical knowledge, it is perhaps better for us still to listen to what Lu Xun (1981: 1: 359) counseled the Chinese of his generation almost a century ago:




> The race that has many who are not self-content will always move forward and always have hope.
>
> The race that knows only to blame others without reflecting on itself is rife with imminent danger and disasters!

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